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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1308
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DEPT FOR DRL/IRF PHIL BARTH
DEPT FOR DRL PETER SAWCHYN

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TAGS: PGOV PREF BO
SUBJECT: BELARUSIAN RELGIOUS LEADERS SHARE THEIR CONCERNS
WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: MINSK 957

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (SBU) As her first official event at her residence, Ambassador hosted a breakfast for leaders of various religious communities in Minsk and visiting EUR/UMB deskoff. While the representative of the GOB-sympathetic Catholic Church was hesitant to air his concerns openly, the Protestant and Hare Krishna representatives spoke freely about their problems with registering buildings of worship with the GOB. The Jewish representative informed Ambassador about anti-Semitism and lack of property restitution in Belarus. All the guests thanked Ambassador for the unique opportunity to meet as a group and discuss the problems affecting their respective communities. End summary.

Hare Krishnas and Protestants Share Registration Woes

¶2. (C) On October 13, Ambassador hosted a breakfast for EUR/UMB Belarus Desk Officer Laura Jordan to meet four heads of religious communities in Belarus. Vyacheslav Goncharenko, pastor of the unregistered, 1,000-member New Life Church (NLC), confirmed that he and 130 of his parishioners were on hunger strike to protest the forced sale of the "cow-barn" building in which they worship (reftel). (Comment: Goncharenko has grown particularly thin but otherwise appeared to be in good health. End comment.) Although the NLC received the government's payment for the building on October 8, the community refused to vacate the premises and set up a round-the-clock vigil at the building for church members and hunger strikers. One hunger striker was hospitalized briefly, but there have not been other problems. On October 13, press reports indicated that the NLC refused to sign the certificate acknowledging their acceptance of the sale of the building to the authorities. On the same day, the NLC barred a state television crew and Minsk City Executive Committee representatives from entering the building.

¶3. (C) Minsk Krishna Association Chairman Sergey Malakhovskiy stated that his organization shared NLC's registration problems. According to Malakhovskiy, local authorities refused to register the Hare Krishnas (HK) place of worship,

claiming the building, purchased in 1990, was zoned for residential use only. He lamented the lack of freedom for his association to celebrate their holidays or their inability to distribute literature about their beliefs without facing criminal charges. Malakhovskiy, however, expressed gratitude to Ambassador for the support that the U.S. repeatedly demonstrated when HK community faced pressure from the GOB.

Jewish Leader Lays Out Concerns and Seeks Advice

¶ 14. (C) President of the umbrella NGO Union of Belarusian Jewish Associations and Congregations Leonid Levin described the problems the Jewish community faces in Belarus, including anti-Semitism and the lack of both property restitution and indigenous rabbis. Levin conceded that while the level of anti-Semitism is lower in Belarus than in surrounding countries, Belarusian Jews remained vulnerable since they do not have any protection from potential attacks. Moreover, Levin noted that there are no laws that guarantee property restitution. With only six synagogues in Belarus, Levin has urged the government to return Jewish property and provide funds to restore the buildings. Levin told Ambassador that almost all the rabbis in Belarus come from Israel and the U.S. and they possess little understanding of the "Belarusian mentality."

¶ 15. (C) Following the breakfast, Levin spoke privately with Ambassador to seek her advice about participating in an official Belarusian delegation to Iran. (Note: Levin had previously refused an invitation from the Iranian Ambassador to visit the Jewish population in Iran. End note.) When Levin told Ambassador that he does not want to participate in

the delegation, she advised him to find an excuse to respectfully decline the invitation.

Catholic Bishop Reticent About Problems

¶ 16. (C) Although the situation of the Roman Catholic Church has improved in Belarus in recent years, the church still faces problems especially in acquiring visas for its visiting clergy. His Excellency and Apostolic Administrator of Minsk-Mogilev Bishop Antonij Dziamyanka, who was elected the Chairman of the Conference of the Catholic Bishops in Belarus on June 14, told Ambassador that more than half of the Catholic priests in Belarus are visiting clergy. When Ambassador inquired about the GOB's recent decision not to renew the visas of twelve Catholic priests and nuns, Dziamyanka dismissed the topic and curtly replied, "we're working on it." While the Bishop was closed-mouth about the problems the Catholic Church faces, Catholic foreign missionaries in Baranovichi told Desk Officer on October 12 that the GOB will not allow the Catholic Church to build additional churches in Minsk.

Comment

¶ 17. (C) This meeting represented the first time in their memory that leaders from different religious communities gathered to discuss issues of common concern. The discussion was generally cordial -- the participants compared notes on the repressions they experienced in Soviet times -- and each guest thanked Ambassador for the unique opportunity, expressing hope for similar meetings in the future. While the Catholic participant was less willing to discuss the problems his church faces -- in part due to occasional magnanimity shown by Lukashenko -- the exchange confirmed for the religious leaders that allies in the struggle for religious freedom in Belarus exist not only among foreign diplomatic missions but within the country as well.

Moore